The Comparative Conceptual Model Argument

A Defeasible Epistemic Argument for Theistic Preference

Bayes Russel

Abstract. This paper develops the Comparative Conceptual Model Argument (CCMA), a defeasible epistemic argument for preferring a theistic conceptual model over relevant competitors. Rather than proceeding through contingency, grounding, cosmological, or ontological dependence, the argument evaluates competing hypotheses as conceptual models according to their comparative epistemic performance under relevant objections and competing hypotheses. The central claim is that comparative epistemic support provides rational agents with defeasible reason to prefer a model and that, given rational updating, credence tends toward convergence upon the comparatively supported model. The argument also distinguishes formal substitution from substantive truth and addresses objections concerning argument from ignorance, underdetermination, ad hoc immunity, Bayesian convergence, and the relation between model preference and truth.

Introduction

Arguments for theism are often framed in terms of causal or metaphysical dependence. The Comparative Conceptual Model Argument takes a different approach. It asks what follows epistemically when one conceptual model is comparatively better supported than its competitors. The immediate conclusion is not that the existence of God has been deductively established. Rather, the claim is that, where a theistic conceptual model possesses the relevant comparative advantage, rational agents have defeasible reason to prefer it.

A conceptual model is used here as a formal framework for representing and comparing hypotheses. The use of arbitrary constants is domain-restricted. An expression's being substitutable within a schema does not itself establish that the corresponding substantive relation obtains in reality. Substitution specifies what falls within the permitted domain of the formal comparison; whether a resulting instance is true or epistemically supported is a separate question.

The argument is:

P1. If a conceptual model has greater comparative epistemic support than its competitors, then rational agents have defeasible reason to prefer it.
P2. This conceptual model has that support because it better withstands relevant objections and competing hypotheses.
C1. Therefore, rational agents have defeasible reason to prefer this conceptual model.
P3. If rational agents have defeasible reason to prefer a conceptual model and they update rationally, then their credences tend to converge on that model.
P4. Rational agents update rationally.
C2. Therefore, rational agents' credences tend to converge on this conceptual model.

Comparative Epistemic Support

The central notion in the CCMA is comparative epistemic support. The claim is not merely that the target model has some support, but that it is better supported than the relevant alternatives. The comparison therefore cannot be made by considering the target model in isolation.

The relevant comparison concerns objections, competing hypotheses, and attack relations directed toward the models under consideration. The possible number of such relations is not fixed in advance. What matters is the performance of the models across the relevant range of challenges. If one model withstands an objection that substantially threatens a competitor, this can affect the comparative epistemic position of the two models.

The argument does not, however, identify the absence of defeat with positive confirmation. A model's remaining undefeated is not by itself sufficient to establish superiority. The intended claim is comparative resistance: the model's performance under relevant attacks contributes to its epistemic position relative to its competitors.

Defeasible Preference

P1 expresses a principle concerning rational preference. If one model is comparatively better supported than its competitors, that difference is rationally relevant to which model an agent should prefer. The reason supplied is defeasible: it may be overridden by new evidence, a successful objection, or a stronger competing hypothesis.

This distinction prevents the argument from confusing rational preference with certainty. The CCMA does not require that the favored model receive maximal credence. It requires only that the comparative epistemic situation provide a reason in its favor.

The distinction between attack and defeat is consequently important. An attack may be raised without succeeding. Conversely, a sufficiently strong objection may defeat a previously justified preference. Defeasibility is precisely the property that allows the epistemic status of the model to be revised.

Bayesian Updating and Convergence

The Bayesian component of the argument is contained in P3. Rational agents should calibrate their beliefs in accordance with their epistemic situation. When an agent has defeasible reason to favor a particular conceptual model and updates rationally, that agent's credence tends toward the model.

This does not entail that every actual agent must arrive at the same conclusion. Agents may possess different evidence, background knowledge, priors, or interpretations. The claim is conditional upon rational updating under the relevant epistemic circumstances.

The relevant structure is:

$$(R(\mathrm{x}, \mathrm{M}) \wedge U(\mathrm{x})) \rightarrow C(\mathrm{x}, \mathrm{M})$$

Probability-raising and convergence should not be treated as synonymous. Evidence may increase the probability assigned to a hypothesis without implying convergence upon it. Convergence requires additional assumptions concerning rational updating and the epistemic conditions in which that updating occurs.

Formalization

Let S(M) mean that M has greater comparative epistemic support than its competitors; R(x, M) mean that x has defeasible reason to prefer M; U(x) mean that x updates rationally; and C(x, M) mean that x's credence tends to converge on M.

1. $S(M) \rightarrow R(x, M)$
2. $S(M)$
3. $R(x, M)$ [1, 2; MP]

4. $(R(x, M) \wedge U(x)) \rightarrow C(x, M)$
5. $U(x)$
6. $R(x, M) \wedge U(x)$ [3, 5; $\wedge$I]
7. $C(x, M)$ [4, 6; MP]

The first inference is Modus Ponens. The second step uses Conjunction Introduction to combine the defeasible preference established at line 3 with rational updating at line 5. The final inference is again Modus Ponens.

Truth-Table Presentation

For the first inference, let *S* stand for *S*(M) and *R* for *R*(x, M). The relevant conditional is $S \rightarrow R$.

S	**R**	**S → R**
T	T	T
T	F	F
F	T	T
F	F	T

Because P1 asserts S → R and P2 asserts S, the premises cannot both be true while R is false. The first inference is therefore truth-functionally valid.

Objections and Replies

Argument from ignorance. A critic might argue that the CCMA merely reasons from the absence of a successful objection: because the model has not been defeated, it is supported. That would not capture the argument. The relevant claim is comparative performance, not mere non-refutation. The target model must outperform its competitors under relevant objections.

Underdetermination. Several models might survive the same objections. If so, resistance alone would not establish superiority. This is precisely why P2 is comparative. Mere adequacy is insufficient; the target model must possess a stronger epistemic position than its relevant competitors.

Ad hoc immunity. A model might appear capable of surviving every objection by continually adding auxiliary assumptions. Such survival would not automatically constitute epistemic success. If a modification is introduced solely to protect the model from criticism, its ad hoc character can itself count against the model's comparative standing.

Bayesian non-convergence. Bayesian agents need not always converge. Different priors and different evidence can produce persistent disagreement. P3 should therefore be read conditionally, rather than as a claim that all actual agents must ultimately agree.

From model preference to truth. Epistemic preference does not automatically entail truth. A model may be useful, coherent, or comparatively successful without literally describing reality. This identifies a genuine limit of the present argument. The CCMA's immediate conclusion is rational preference, not deductive truth. A further argument would be required to establish the connection between comparative model success and truth or approximate truth.

Scope and Conclusion

The CCMA should not be confused with the cosmological argument, contingency argument, grounding argument, or ontological argument. Its immediate conclusion is not simply that God exists. Instead, the argument maintains that there are rational grounds to prefer a conceptual model corresponding to the theistic hypothesis if that model is comparatively better epistemically supported than its competitors.

The overall structure can be summarized as:

$$\textit{comparative epistemic support} \rightarrow \textit{defeasible preference} \rightarrow \textit{rational convergence}$$

The central philosophical burden therefore falls on P2: whether the theistic model actually meets the comparative-support criterion. That question concerns the relevant attack relations, their epistemic significance, the performance of competing models, and the standards by which comparative support is assessed. Those are the substantive issues on which the CCMA must ultimately be defended.

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